



ASSOCIATION OF
PUBLIC &
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CECE

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AWARDS PROGRAM

IEP CATEGORY - TALENT

2024
CASE
STUDY

East Carolina University

**Access and Education through Community
Service Learning: Innovations in Rural Oral
Health**

HISTORY OF DENTAL CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina is among the most desirable states in the United States. It ranks 11th in growth of gross state product, 9th in total population, and saw employment numbers increase by 2077% between 2018 and 2023. It is also a place of extremes where economic prosperity differs considerably depending on region. In rural areas, educational opportunities, jobs, and healthcare can be limited. This rural case study focuses on access to dental care.



Fourth-year dental student, Kari Wordsworth, provides care to a patient during her rotation at the School of Dental Medicine's community service-learning center in Spruce Pine

Overall, North Carolina ranks 47th out of 50 states in number of dentists per capita where, on average dentists care for 10,000 people in rural areas compared to urban regions with five dentists per 10,000. Four counties, all in northeastern NC, have no dentists. The growing gap between patient need and healthcare capacity depends on many factors including availability of a dental team. Dental education and strategic placement of training clinics play a significant role in bridging this gap.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

East Carolina University **School of Dental Medicine (SoDM)** has taken an innovative approach to providing care in rural North Carolina while also contributing to growing the oral healthcare workforce. The earliest vision included a promise to educate new dentists who were naturally inclined to remain in NC and practice in rural and underserved parts of the state. Through eight **community-service learning centers (CSLC)** — situated statewide from mountain to coast— and a campus-based clinic, ECU provides accessible care to patients alongside rigorous, well-rounded clinical experiences for students and residents. These centers serve as the school's "secret weapon" against the challenges that North Carolina faces in oral health care — aging dentists, remote locations, lack of insurance or means of funding and other challenges specific to rural communities, families, and patients.

Three overarching, interrelated goals drove CSLC site selection and optimize ECU's mission and commitment to North Carolina:



1. Robust educational experiences for students and residents
2. Improved access to patient care for communities
3. Fiscal sustainability

ECU's leadership worked with local advisory boards to identify potential clinic space and communities that would benefit from services using demographic analyses, the presence of collaborative relationships and areas of synergy with local practitioners, and financial sustainability based on the continuation of present funding levels, and consideration of student and dental school infrastructure requirements to make site decisions.

Since 2015, more than 450 students have graduated, 90% of whom continue to practice dentistry in North Carolina. ECU dental student debt is about half the national average for graduating dental students because this model allows the University to combine state education dollars with Medicaid healthcare dollars. This allows students to consider returning to rural areas to set up their practices. Fourth-year dental students complete 9-week rotations in three different CSLC, for a total of 27 weeks serving on a dental team and living in a rural community. They provide state-of-the-art dental care to all citizens who need it, gain clinical experience as well as exposure to multiple cultures and communities. In 2024 the program celebrated a milestone with more than 100,000 patients cared for across all 100 North Carolina counties since the first CSCL opened in 2012. Many patients would not have had access to care without having the CSLC in their community. The program received the 2019 Gies Award from the American Dental Education Association for the innovative model of placing CSLCs across the state to educate dental students and residents while addressing North Carolina's oral health care disparities.

DRIVING ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

Communities also gain economic prosperity where CSLC are located. Each CSLC provides over \$1million in economic impacts to its local community. The Centers also spur workforce development through employment and training of staff and mentoring of those within the community seeking to further their education.

The CSLCs serve as a hub for new outreach programming and grant projects geared toward reaching more patients in rural communities, including special initiatives in Bertie and Jones counties as well as the ECU Smiles for Veterans program, which has served more than 400 veterans at eight CSLC locations. These programs work in tandem with the Veteran Smiles Foundation and Veteran's Life Center, whose mission is to improve the lives of NC veterans by providing temporary housing and



services with the goal of achieving self-reliance.

The CSLCs also host the Give Kids a Smile Initiative, providing free dental care to children and oral health education and awareness. CSLC partners include community colleges whose dental hygiene and dental assistant students complete rotation requirements at the centers as well. This partnership is helping support North Carolina Dental Society efforts to increase the number of NC residents entering the dental field which will significantly reduce the Dental Team shortages in the state.

The CSLCs expanded access for underserved communities such migrant farmworkers, one of eastern North Carolina's most vulnerable populations. Additionally, the program works with the Arise Collective, a non-profit organization whose mission is to equip women with tools and support to transition from incarceration back into their communities. Most recently, the school is contributing to research in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU to increase connectivity for telehealth in homes across northeastern NC. Most unique is a first in the nation grant funded to focus on intensive residency training on the oral health care of special needs patients.

BREADTH OF IMPACT

This project epitomizes campus and community efforts to provide student success, public service, and regional transformation, the anchors of ECU's mission. Students are learning invaluable lessons in community-based service learning rooted in our most underserved counties. The extension of dental services to rural residents in NC through clinical and community service experiences is moving the needle on regional transformation. ECU leverages its public-service driven strengths to create community-connected assets with the goal of not only providing inclusivity for underserved populations, but also creating healthy, resilient, and sustainable places.



LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

Supporting Information:

- [North Carolina State Economic Profile](#)
- [Veterans Life Center](#)
- [Arise Collective](#)
- [Community Service Learning Centers](#)
- [School of Dental Medicine - Office of Research](#)

Articles:

- [100,000 SMILES; ECU dental school marks statewide care milestone with 100,000 patients served](#)
- [ECU dental school reaches 100,000 patients served across North Carolina](#)
- [School provides free dental care for children at six NC location in February](#)
- [ECU to build dental service learning center in Brunswick County](#)
- [ECU opens seventh dental service learning center in Spruce Pine](#)
- [A POWERFUL RESOURCE - ECU's eight dental service learning center open in Brunswick County](#)
- [Smiles for Veterans](#)



ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America's oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU's mission is to expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

ABOUT THE IEP PROGRAM

APLU and its [Commission on Economic and Community Engagement \(CECE\)](#) established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The **IEP Program** recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The **IEP Awards Program** recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- Talent and workforce development
- Innovation, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- Place development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: www.APLU.org/IEP

